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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN ROMA PROPOSE COMMON AGENDA TO GOVERNMENT

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Bulgarian Roma representatives gathered in Sofia on the eve of the International Human Rights Day to endorse a common strategy for cooperation with the government. More than 100 Roma representatives discussed ways to accelerate integration and crafted a common platform on issues such as education and healthcare. Roma leaders will now urge the government to integrate these proposals into the Government's new Roma integration strategy, due in 2009. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Bulgarian Roma number approximately 800 thousand or slightly over 10 percent of the Bulgarian population. This includes almost 400,000 who self-identify as Turks or Bulgarians, but are indentified by others as Roma. In the past, the Roma NGO sector was divided, spending a disproportionate time warring over what Roma groups viewed as limited donor funding. Roma leaders now acknowledge that working together - and with the government -- will not only help the small NGOs survive, but will also be the best way for the community to take advantage of newly-available EU funding.

¶3. (SBU) This new spirit of cooperation was seen in the December 9th event organized by seven Roma NGOs. Led by an energetic alumnus of the USG's International Visitors Program, the Amalipe Foundation was the driving force behind the conference. The event attracted a diverse audience and succeeded in shifting the focus of discussion from listing of problems to finding solutions.

¶4. (SBU) Encouraged by the opening remarks of the Dutch Ambassador, who sponsored the event, the participants eagerly debated and agreed on the need to develop plausible proposals, supported with sufficient funding. In the end, the group adopted a common declaration urging the government to continue Roma integration efforts by ensuring strict enforcement of a new strategy, financial guarantees and monitoring mechanisms, as well as an increased role for Roma NGOs. The participants also proposed a set of specific actions in four priority areas - healthcare, education, Roma culture and Roma women.

¶5. (SBU) The Bulgarian government representatives at the event - the Deputy Chairman of the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues and the National Coordinator for the Roma Inclusion Decade - welcomed the initiative of the Roma community. Both officials acknowledged the need to update the 1999 framework program on Roma integration, set to expire in 2009. They also admitted the government's failure to fulfill some of its commitments, noting in particular the area of educational integration. A 2006 study indicated that 30 percent of Romani students attended completely segregated schools. Low graduation rates, combined with negative attitudes towards Roma, hinder the ability of many Roma to access the labor market. The unemployment rate among Roma is nearly 65 percent, reaching 80 percent in some regions.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: The government's initial response to this Roma initiative was positive, but real action will be needed to turn these proposals into government policy. Implementation of the current government strategy on Roma suffered from poor coordination, concerns over public spending, and the general perception that Roma are the beneficiaries of a disproportionate number of government

programs. Such weakness and attitudes remain, but the improved level of organization and coordination among Bulgaria's Roma groups, if sustained, should increase pressure on the government to stick to commitments. End comment.

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